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The Polish Minority in Croatia before and after the Fall of Former Yugoslavia

In the context of the ethnic problems in Croatia, one would hardly think about the Poles living there. All the republics of ex-Yugoslavia have mixed ethnic compositions. Ethnic problems have always been felt in these areas and since the fall of former Yugoslavia and the rise of five independent countries, the problems of Serbs, Slovenes, Croats, Macedonians, Muslims from Bosnia and some other nationalities have been constantly discussed in the media. It should be borne in mind, however, that there are other nationalities living in these territories, too, who have settled there over the ages for various reasons.

One of these nationalities are the Poles. Nowadays, the Polish group in Croatia is quite distinct compared to the Polish minority in former Yugoslavia and the Polish minorities living in other countries. The history of the presence of Poles in these territories goes as far back as the 18th century. Early on, some Polish scholars visited the regions inhabited by the Southern Slavs; they were followed by a number of Polish revolutionaries moving there (Durković-Jakšić 1977:143–5, 151–8, 184–90, 217–20). Some of those Poles settled in the territory of former Yugoslavia. The first organised wave of Polish settlers in this region comprised a group of peasants who arrived in the present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia soon after 1878 – the year of the annexation of that region by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It was thus an inner migration within one monarchy and it was organised in order to improve the farming skills in the area of Banja Luka and Tuzla, where farming was not modern enough. Along with the peasants, some Polish physicians and engineers likewise took advantage of the opportunity to live and work in Banja Luka, Sarajevo and Zagreb. All these Poles (or their descendants) came back to Poland after the Second World War (Albin 1983:111).

Currently, the Polish minority in Croatia consists in more than 95% of women who have married Croats and settled down in their husbands' homeland. There are around 2,000 people of Polish origin living there. They arrived in Croatia in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, when Croatia was still a part of former communist Yugoslavia. The

principal centres inhabited by Poles are: Zagreb, Split and Rijeka. Functioning in these places is a branch of the Polish Cultural Society "Mikołaj Kopernik".

Most of the Poles in Croatia have higher education. They often hold posts of responsibility and work within their professions. Most of them came to ex-Yugoslavia in the 1970s, when the economic, political and social conditions both in Poland and Yugoslavia were very different than today. The Poles interviewed recall that period as a time of prosperity and political freedom in Croatia. The difference was particularly obvious to them as they had come from a country under an oppressive communist regime.

The Poles arriving in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s harboured a set of stereotypes concerning their new homeland and its people. Croatia (then Yugoslavia) was seen as a country of warm climate and wonderful landscapes, in which the Balkan model of life prevailed. However, to express in detail the meaning of "the Balkan model" was pretty difficult for the informants. This expression reflected first of all a perceived difference between the Polish and Croatian cultures, whereby the Polish one was seen as western-like, and "more civilised", while Croatia (Yugoslavia, the Balkans) supposedly embodied a primitive, dirty and less-civilised country. Its inhabitants were thought of as a noisy people which knew how to content itself with small, ordinary things in life; women in that country were seen as subordinate to men.

The colloquial Polish term denoting a citizen of Yugoslavia – "Jugol" – did not have positive connotations. Rather, it brought to mind the image of a man with tanned complexion and black hair who came to Poland by an expensive, western car, spoke a language similar to Polish, sold golden jewellery and could afford to shop in "Pewex."[1] Yugoslavia was considered in Poland as a homogenous state inhabited by a single, united "Yugoslav" nation – in line with the political doctrine of Belgrade. From the point of view of nationality, an average Pole saw no difference between Croatians, Slovenes, Serbs or Macedonians. The nations living in ex-Yugoslavia and their cultures were considered as regional dissimilarities inside one homogenous nation. The "Yugoslavs" were a nation whose mentality was familiar to the Poles ("Slavic soul"), speaking a language similar to Polish, which nevertheless represented a different cultural model. Moreover, those stereotypes overlapped with the images the stemmed from the communistic ideology. Yugoslavia was then a country situated on the border between the block of totalitarian countries and the countries of Western Europe – democratic and free. That particular status generally meant a change for the better for the Poles migrating there. For an average Pole 30 or 40 years ago, to leave for Yugoslavia was to get away from the communist regime in Poland and to get a chance to taste a normal life where you could buy everyday goods in shops without queuing for hours; not to mention the fact that having a Yugoslav passport allowed the bearer to take a trip to, say, Italy. The Poles who visited Yugoslavia in those times emphasised the economic and political differences between that country and Poland: well-stocked shops, high living standards and greater freedom in everyday life. To go to Yugoslavia at that time one needed an invitation. This is how some of the Poles

[1] A chain of stores where expensive goods, mostly of foreign origin, inaccessible in ordinary shops, were sold. One had to pay for them in dollars or government-issued "dollar certificates"; Polish currency was not accepted. An average Polish citizen was not able to shop there – it was too expensive and dollars were hard to come by.

I interviewed came to know their future husbands: they had asked them for an invitation in order to be able to come and see Yugoslavia. It is also interesting to note how the Polish women recall their first impressions of Croatia and the Croats upon arrival:

> At the very beginning of my stay in Croatia, I was surprised to see that, for example, when I went to a hair-dresser, they gave me a cup of coffee.[2]
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> Shops were full of everything. There was greater freedom. One could do whatever one wanted to.
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> Croatians and particularly Dalmatians are noisy, full of mettle and don't like problems. If they could, they'd like to spend their whole lives on vacation. They are sociable and like to organise meetings. They would like to live a life of ease; they are big kids.

Speaking about differences between life in Poland and Yugoslavia, the interviewed Poles stressed some aspects: religious customs and religiosity, children's upbringing, men's attitude towards women, cuisine, free time and recreation. I shall concentrate here on two of these: men's attitude towards women and religiosity. Talking about the relations between the sexes, the Poles mentioned two stereotypes. The first one concerned the image of a Polish gentleman who kisses women on the hands and bestows flowers on them. The other one referred to the general image of life in Mediterranean countries. It brings to mind the so-called Southern style of life and the particular model of a man. The informants associate Croatia, and particularly Dalmatia, with this Southern model (which they also call Balkan). A simplified embodiment of that stereotype is the image of a man riding a donkey in the Dalmatian countryside while a woman walks behind him carrying a load of firewood. In this context it is hardly surprising that Polish women were viewed as a kind of moderate feminists.

> Personally, I have never accepted that disrespectful attitude towards women and my marriage tends to follow the Polish model.
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> The Poles are more intelligent than the Croats and they have greater respect for women. In Poland there is equality of rights, while here women must work at home just because they are women.
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> When, for example, men take a walk, women prepare lunch. A man isn't expected to wash up.
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> In Poland women enjoy a higher status as wives, mothers and women. I was one of the very few women's rights activists in Croatia. It has to do with Croatian history as well as the upbringing of certain persons. Mixed marriages between Serbs and Croats, or even Bosnians (although it's not a nation), resulted in a blending of cultures and an increased influence of the Muslim model. I had to fight a bit in my family to gain an equal position.

Religiosity and religious practices in ex-Yugoslavia differed considerably from the Polish reality. Both Poland and Croatia are Catholic countries. But according to what the Croatians and the Poles living there say, under communist regime in ex-Yugoslavia, over 90% of the population were atheists. Believers were sacked, particularly those who held responsible posts. That was the result of the secularisation tendency favoured by Belgrade and the policy of the communist government, which wanted to suppress all kinds of social elites. One of those elites was the Catholic clergy in Croatia. To be sure, in those times it was rarely the Croats who held positions of

[2] All the quotations are from Polish women living in Croatia whom I interviewed in 1997.

rank and responsibility in Croatia. These were mostly occupied by Serbians or the representatives of national minorities (Hungarians, Poles).

> In the past, the high posts were filled by the Serbs and strangers. In the company where I worked, such posts were held by a Hungarian, myself and the Serbs.

The Poles coming to Croatia in those times were surprised to see how few people attended mass on Sundays and to learn they had to work on Christmas: 25th December was not a holiday there. In Poland where Communism put heavily restricted political and economical freedom, people nevertheless preserved the Catholic tradition and faith. Of course, those who wanted to keep their lucrative positions in communist party did not go to church and did not baptise their children, but the majority of the Polish population remained Catholic and Catholic feasts were officially celebrated.

> Under Communism, religious celebrations were forbidden, but I went to church from the very beginning – early in the morning, so that nobody could see me. In the building where we lived there were many Serbs and during religious holidays there was always someone who dropped in to check if I was preparing something. One year I even had to hide the Christmas tree in a wardrobe. They were awful, just like the Croatian Communists. The babies couldn't be baptised. Now they accept baptism as adults.
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> In Poland even an atheist doesn't work on Sundays. And here many people work in their houses on Sundays. They dig the gardens, wash, clean.

The interviewed Poles admit that since the creation of the Republic of Croatia, all the cultural elements that point to the Croatian ethnicity of the people are emphasised. The Catholic religion is one of such elements. Together with the Latin alphabet and a linguistic preference for German and Italian rather than Turkish borrowings, it forms a core of Western-like aspects which have become typical Croatian features, set in opposition to Serbian culture. Because of that there are more and more Croats who designate themselves as Catholic.

The collapse of Communism, fall of ex-Yugoslavia and the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina brought about great changes in the territory I am writing about. The creation of an independent Republic of Croatia, war damage and the nationalist government of Franjo Tuđman and his party gave rise to a lot of changes in the social, political and economic life of Croatia. Huge unemployment, thousands of war refugees and exiles, the collapse of state-owned companies are just some of the problems Croatia has faced for around ten years. All these factors have brought down the living standards in Croatia. The hardest hit are the Croats themselves, but the national minorities living in Croatia have also been affected. From the legal point of view, 14 ethnic groups in Croatia have the status of a national minority. The Poles are not among them. I think there are two main reasons for that: the low number of Poles in Croatia and the specific makeup of this group – there are no Polish families there, but only Poles who have married into Croatian families.

This situation leads to an easy assimilation of this group. My research shows that, on the one hand, in mixed Polish-Croatian families some Polish traditions are preserved, like the celebration of Christmas, Easter and other religious (Catholic) feasts. In most cases the husbands and the children of Polish women have at least a passive knowledge of Polish. But on the other hand, their descendants lose their

Polish identity already in the second generation and call themselves Croats. Many of them fought in the last war as Croatian soldiers and that fact, combined with the nationalist rhetoric of the Croatian government during the war and just after it, caused the loss of the "Polish component" of their ethnicity and raised the sense of Croatian identity.

> During the war I was in Croatia. My two sons went to the army. It is an awful feeling to wait for children and not to know whether they'll come back home from the front safe and unhurt. The war was simply a Serbian aggression against Croatia. Having Croatia liberated was a wonderful feeling.

For most of the Poles from Croatia, the problem of national antagonisms, the aggression against Croatia and the war was not easy to understand. Before the war they did not think about that problem: they did not notice it. The outbreak of the war made the Polish learn the history of the ex-Yugoslav nations just to understand the nature of the conflict and form an opinion on who was right. The assessment of that war by the Polish women depended on the nationality of their husbands. Some of them took an objective stand on that conflict. In most cases, however the wives of Serbs fully shared the opinions of their husbands. They tried to justify the Serbian aggression against Croatia and stressed the difficult situation of the Serbian minority in today's Croatia. On the other hand, Croats' wives adopted a critical attitude towards Serbians and unconditionally accepted everything that was Croatian.

> When the war broke out, I started to read eagerly the history of Yugoslavia, because I wanted to know what was going on. Until the very beginning of the war I had no idea about the Croatian-Serbian conflict. Those Poles who married Serbs are full of their ideology. And even during our meetings at the 'Mikołaj Kopernik' society we quarrelled about the war. They kept the Serbian side and we the Croatian one.
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> No nation attacked Serbia. It was Serbians (members of the Orthodox Church, using Cyrillic) who tried to destroy and subordinate Catholic Croatia, which was only defending itself. The genocide was committed by the Serbs who did ethnic cleansing. By mentality, culture, religion and also cruelty the Serbians are similar to the Russians. There were also incidents in Croatia but that's nothing comparing to what the Serbs did. About Muslims I won't say a word. It's enough to mention that the fundamentalists helped them.

Economically speaking, the situation is very different now from what it was 30–40 years ago. The Poles left their poor, corrupt and underdeveloped country and came to ex-Yugoslavia, which seemed to be well-off and secure. Nowadays the situation is just the opposite. Since the fall of Communism, Poland has been developing rapidly and is constantly making progress towards greater stability, while in Croatia the standard of living has decreased. Even so, this situation does not result in a re-emigration tendency among the Poles in Croatia. On the other hand, many young Polish-Croatian couples plan to settle down in Poland rather than in Croatia.

In conclusion, I would like to point out how far the assimilation processes can go in the case of such a small and diffuse group as the Poles in Croatia. It is interesting to note how the stereotypes of the Poles about Yugoslavia and its inhabitants changed. The Poles, objective and neutral as they were about Croats, Serbs or "Yugoslavs" at the very beginning, after some time spent in their country took the opinions of their husbands. In some cases they even became "more Croatian" or "more Serbian" then their husbands themselves.

> The Croats and the Serbians have two different religions, traditions and characters. The Serbs are rapacious and conceited. They impose their will upon other nations. The Croats are hard-working, just like the Slovenians and Macedonians, while the Serbs are lazy. They like to shout that they can fight, but they can't work. That's why in ex-Yugoslavia the Serbs were the officers in the army, they took responsible posts, while the other nations were supposed to work.
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> During the war I stayed in Croatia. I was in Zagreb when the Serbs bombed the city. I consider myself half-Croatian. That's why I think this war was useful. Here it was like in Poland – it had to be liberated. The war was fair. Both the Serbs and the Croats are guilty of genocide. They did it when they were drunk.

The Poles, as they themselves admit, did not know much about the history and culture of Croatia when they arrived there. While living in that country they used to learn the "truth" about ex-Yugoslavia from their husbands and the close environment. And this is, I think, the main reason why they see Croatia, the Serbian-Croatian relationship and ex-Yugoslavia the way they do: from their husbands' perspective.

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